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The Unchangeable War

Brian M. Jenkins

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PREFACE

The following is the text of a talk first presented in July 1969. At the time, the author had just returned from his third trip to Vietnam, where he had served as a captain in Special Forces from December 1966 to December 1967 and as a member of the Long Range Planning Task Group at MACV headquarters in Saigon from October 1968 to July 1969. The views presented here are a personal assessment rather than a research product in the usual sense, but they do reflect the author's deep involvement in both the prosecution of the war and the extensive research on the organization and policy problems raised by our commitments in Vietnam. The paper has provoked both favorable and critical responses among those in the defense establishment who have read it. Because of the continuing relevance of the topic, it is now being made available to a larger audience.

SUMMARY

The Army's doctrine, its tactics, its organization, its weapons -- its entire repertoire of warfare was designed for conventional war in Europe. In Vietnam, the Army simply performed its repertoire even though it was frequently irrelevant to the situation. Changes were proposed, repeatedly, but few changes were made. Our Army seemed to be prevented by its own doctrinal and organizational rigidity from making any changes in the way in which it has fought this war.

Among the institutional obstacles to change are the belief that the changes proposed might not work; the conviction that what we are doing now is working satisfactorily; the belief that what has been needed is simply more of the same, therefore changes are not necessary; the belief that organizational changes are impossible in the midst of a war; the view that the war in Vietnam is an aberration and does not represent the future demands that the Army might have to face; the bureaucratic rejection of new doctrines as exotic and of marginal importance; the unaltered career incentives to continue what we are doing now; the sense of institutional loyalty that rejects external pressure for change even when it coincides with private convictions; the twelve-month tour, which condemns us to repeat our errors; and the lack of a single commander to impose his will on the entire system. 

Vietnamization is not a solution to our own problem of organizational rigidity. The danger exists that in transferring the war to the Vietnamese, we will transfer also our organization, our style of fighting, and our mistakes, thus rendering the Vietnamese incapable of doing anything different from what we have done, and by which we have achieved only limited success.

THE UNCHANGEABLE WAR

Whether the United States remains in Vietnam a year, a month, a week, or a day, it ought to do it better. Many individuals, including myself, have spent the past few years arguing for changes that would enable it to do better. Slowly we became aware of immense obstacles to implementing the changes that we have proposed, or for that matter any changes whatsoever. It has become apparent that we are locked in our present strategy and methods of operation. The war on our side is unchangeable.

The possibility exists that even without change, our present strategy and methods of operation might eventually, at great cost to ourselves and the South Vietnamese, prove to be successful in grinding the enemy into submission. How close, or how far, we are from that point, I cannot say. The lack of a clear, attainable, or decisive objective and adequate measures of success in reaching that objective make it difficult to assess the progress of the war in Vietnam. Enemy soldiers continue to die at a greater rate than our own, but we do not know how many enemy soldiers must die before the enemy's will cracks or his army begins to disintegrate. Frequently, increases in the amount of our own military efforts are measured and this is called progress. On this basis, if twice as many bombs are dropped per month in 1969 as were dropped per month in 1967, we are doing better -- the same with leaflets, battalion days of operations, night patrols, and so on. If we ignore the scores and the statistics, as the enemy seems

to have done, then we are left with a different question: *What is different in Vietnam today from two or three years ago, and what is still the same?* I have had to ask myself that question frequently. What impresses me is the remarkable degree to which things remain the same. Our military institution seems to be prevented by its own doctrinal and organizational rigidity from understanding the nature of this war and from making the necessary modifications to apply its power more intelligently, more economically, and above all, more relevantly. Much more troubling than our apparent failures in Vietnam is our inability to learn and apply lessons from these failures. It is not difficult to know what has been wrong with our strategy and tactics in Vietnam. A good many people have looked at the situation and they all have come up with remarkably similar answers.

So the real question is: Why are the U.S. Government institutions, notably but not exclusively its military components, unable to adapt to the kind of war we ought to have been fighting? I do not believe that the war was "unwinnable." It could have been done. By that I mean that the Viet Cong could have been rendered inoperable as anything more than a well-organized political party, and that the North Vietnamese could have been faced with the continuation of an increasingly expensive military effort with faint hope of an outcome favorable to them. It could have been done with less violence and at less cost to ourselves. Changes were necessary -- changes that were unfortunately described as radical, an adjective that has come to be fatal for any proposal in Vietnam.

My conviction that it could have been done with change sets me apart from the official military thinkers who believe that "victory" -- unequivocal defeat of the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese armed forces -- could have been or still can be accomplished with more -- either *more troops, more time, or more latitude* in the application of our military power. It also sets me apart from the cynics who argue that radical change is impossible and "more" is domestically unacceptable, therefore "victory," whatever that may be, is unattainable, so we ought to get out. I must admit, however, that I am substantially closer to the position of those who believe change is

impossible than I was several years ago.

The situation has changed in some regards, of course. The enemy has moved the war from the northernmost provinces of the country, where it was in 1967, to the area around Saigon, where in 1967 the war was considered over. The quality of the enemy soldier has declined and at the same time there seems to be a new willingness to hurl North Vietnamese units in suicidal attacks against American positions. Previously, North Vietnamese Army units were protected by Viet Cong units and were committed to battle only under the most propitious circumstances. Present enemy tactics seem to be motivated by a desire to impose casualties on Americans regardless of the cost to themselves. There have been a few changes on our side as well. The bombing of North Vietnam was ended under President Johnson, and President Nixon, instead of sending more troops to Vietnam, ordered some to come home. While we have applied our advanced technology to the creation of new hardware, our fundamental doctrines have not been basically altered.

The recurring accusation that the war in Vietnam has been a laboratory for testing new methods of warfare is annoying to an advocate of *real* change. Of course, there have been changes in our weapons and troop delivery capabilities during the past few years, but these changes were made to enable our forces to do more of what they were already doing or to do it faster, without questioning the validity of what was being done in the first place. It is like two church architects arguing the merits of the Gothic arch as opposed to the Romanesque arch. Nobody in this case is questioning Christianity, merely architecture.

I recall the remark made by one senior American officer in Saigon who said, "I'll be damned if I permit the United States Army, its institutions, its doctrine, and its traditions, to be destroyed just to win this lousy war." Firepower and mobility are icons in our doctrine of warfare. They go all the way back to General Forrest's "Git thar fustest with the mostest." As a result of technological advances we have more firepower and mobility in Vietnam now than we had four years ago, and theoretically we have always had more firepower and mobility than the Viet Cong. Considering our apparent lack

of success, however, the case can be made that superior firepower and mobility have been perhaps irrelevant in this war. Even General Abrams, a World War II tank battalion commander and therefore a disciple of firepower and mobility, has issued directives that have been interpreted as constraints upon our firepower, and he has reacted favorably to suggestions for new tactics that would seem to inhibit our mobility.

Our present concept of warfare has not been altered by four years of experience in Vietnam. War is regarded as a series of conventional battles between two armies in which one side will lose and, accepting this loss as decisive, will sue for peace. The losing side will be determined primarily by personnel losses. Essentially it is a strategy of attrition, and its principal criterion for success is the number of enemy soldiers killed in action. In Vietnam, instead of a series of large conventional battles, we have fought myriad little battles, but many still believe that the side that loses the most men must lose the war. Other notions, such as "winning hearts and minds," have been added, but these other notions are considered incidental. Our army remains enemy-oriented and casualty-oriented. War, then, is assumed to be a battlefield where tactics rather than strategy are important; hence good tacticians are necessary and are promoted. Good tactics are evidenced by a large number of enemy dead on the battlefield.

The defects that make this concept inoperable in Vietnam are obvious. Most importantly, it has been demonstrated statistically that the enemy initiates contact most of the time and avoids it when he desires. He thereby controls his own rate of casualties, negating any strategy based upon attrition. The enemy has been willing to suffer losses at a far greater rate than our own, but he has not accepted these losses as decisive and refuses to sue for peace. Instead, he prolongs the conflict, which nullifies our claim to victory. We are winning, but we must keep winning indefinitely. The most damaging indictment of our concept of warfare is that our military superiority and successes on the battlefield do not challenge the enemy's political control of the people, which he maintains by his promises of a better society and, when that fails, by intimidation and terror. Our military strategy may be, as I believe it is, irrelevant to the situation.

General Abrams, in his first year of command, has made a substantial shift away from this enemy-oriented strategy toward one that focuses upon the protection of the friendly population and the neutralization of the Viet Cong infrastructure rather than the destruction of enemy combat units. But he has only partly succeeded in making his own ideas prevail over the traditional doctrine.

Why does even General Abrams have difficulty in making his own ideas prevail? When so many of the changes have been recommended again and again over the past years, why has there been so little change? What are the institutional obstacles to change?

The first obstacle to change, of course, is the belief held by many that the innovations recommended simply would not work or that they would not work better, or that they would work but at the expense of exchanging victory for an economical stalemate.

The second and more important obstacle is the conviction that what we are doing now is successful. It *is* successful -- according to criteria that the institution itself has established. And the only way that this "success" can be challenged is by challenging the criteria. The criteria that are used now are operational criteria. By that I mean that it is possible to measure winning as a continuing process, but it is not possible to measure progress toward an ultimate victory because that goal has never been clearly defined. *The operations are the strategy.* In the absence of a goal or a strategy to reach that goal if we had one, the operational criteria remain valid by default, and by those criteria we are winning. One does not change a winning strategy.

The third obstacle to change is the belief that what has been needed is simply more of the same, bolstered by the view, at least until recently, that Washington really would supply more. Every instance of failure was met with a request for additional troops on the assumption that additional force would hasten the arrival of an inevitable victory. As long as the belief in "more" existed, the necessity for change was not considered, and the notion of "more" persisted well into 1969.

The fourth obstacle to change is the widely held myth that organizational changes cannot be made in the midst of a war. Military planners are prepared to think and talk about new concepts of strategy, tactics, and operations as long as this does not entail organizational changes. I found this true even among military planners who consider themselves to be "radical" thinkers. While they accepted the principles of an alternate strategy, they rejected actual reorganization as "unsaleable." To make their ideas more saleable, the planners moved away from anything that smacked of reorganization to the point that I am not sure that what was left untouched could do what they expected it to do. The Army is organized according to the concept of war that I have already described. A battalion does its thing, and as a battalion it may not be able to do otherwise. It is my contention that organization and strategy are inextricably linked. Hannibal had elephants and therefore he had an elephant strategy even in the Alps. In rejecting changes in organization, the institution has thereby rejected changes in its operations since *the operations are what the organization is*.

The fifth obstacle to change is the feeling among many that the war in Vietnam is irrelevant to the institution. Many in the military argue against making drastic organizational changes on the basis of experience in Vietnam, since the war there is regarded by them as an aberration. The higher military echelons tend to be dominated by men of World War II European theater experience whose concept of the future war, for which the Army must be prepared, is a European-style general war. The Army's doctrine, its tactics, its organization, its weapons -- its entire repertoire of warfare -- was designed for conventional war in Europe. In Vietnam, the Army simply performed its repertoire. Some recognized the fact that there was little relationship between what the Army could do and what needed to be done in Vietnam. As one general observed, "A conventional military force, no matter how bent, twisted, malformed or otherwise 'reorganized' is *still* one hell of a poor instrument with which to engage insurgents." And so, bending, twisting, and otherwise reorganizing was resisted. According to its recent graduates, the Command and General Staff College has not substantially changed its curriculum to make it more relevant to the

Vietnam experience. Even now most of the Army's research is directed toward general-war studies. The war in Vietnam is regarded as an exotic interlude between the wars that really count. Therefore, changing the whole organization to fight it is undesirable. Instead, new doctrines pertaining to Vietnam-type conflicts have been buried in exotic organizations. *Unconventional* warfare -- the word itself is indicative of the Army's attitude toward it -- has remained the satrapy of Special Forces, which is regarded by most army officers as an oddball organization and a career dead end. The responsibility for counterinsurgency training was also given to Special Forces, and after that largely ignored by the Army, especially when the buildup in Vietnam seemed to make counterinsurgency irrelevant because the war was now big. Until it got big, the Vietnam war was ignored. Prior to the buildup one lieutenant colonel, upon requesting combat duty in Vietnam, was advised by his career counselor in military personnel that an assignment to a line unit in Korea would be more beneficial to his career than an adventure in Vietnam. Activities such as unconventional warfare, counterinsurgency, and psychological operations are still regarded as being of only marginal concern to soldiers.

The sixth obstacle to change is the lack of personal career incentives to promote change. Instead, orthodoxy is preserved by promoting those who perform well according to orthodox criteria. In line with the reasoning that the institution should not be disrupted to deal with an extraordinary war, the promotion system has remained normal, with few spectacular rises or demotions on the basis of outstanding performance in Vietnam. Good efficiency reports, which eventually mean promotions, are given on the basis of competence in the field according to the criteria that I have already described. The number of enemy soldiers killed in action is still the principal gauge of a commander's effectiveness. So when General Abrams issues a directive that would seem to downgrade the desire for high body counts, his guidance actually runs counter to the career incentives of his subordinate unit commanders, particularly those at battalion level.

The seventh obstacle to change is, oddly enough, loyalty, which in this instance prevents change. The Army is an institution with a

well-developed sense of loyalty, both upward and downward. Therefore, when a field commander does something that is within the doctrine, even though it may be considered disastrous in terms of the cost, loyalty requires that the Army close ranks and defend that commander's actions in public even though in private they would not have done the same. The assault upon Ap Bia, Hamburger Hill, is an outstanding example. It was tactically correct, but had disastrous consequences. The same process protects all senior officers in Vietnam, and the same process causes the military to reject any proposals for change which, whether they come from junior officers at the bottom, civilians in the Pentagon, or institutional heretics like a General Gavin or a General Shoup, even remotely might be taken to impugn the competence of the commanders. Private doubts just do not make it in military institutions.

The eighth obstacle to change is the lack of an organizational memory. The Army in Vietnam is like a recording tape that is erased every twelve months. I am convinced that the twelve-month tour condemns us to learning the same lessons over and over again. Defenders of the twelve-month tour say that it is the single most important factor in the maintenance of the high morale of our forces. High morale is assumed to guarantee high performance. Conversely, it is assumed that because the enemy's morale is low, he must be falling apart. In this war, paradoxically, we may have high-morale losers and low-morale winners.

The ninth obstacle to change is that we do not have in Vietnam a commander with overall authority. Since we are discussing our own institutions, we may ignore for the moment the Vietnamese Armed Forces and the Korean Armed Forces, over which General Abrams exercises no command authority whatsoever. Let us also ignore the United States Air Force, Navy, and Marine Corps, which report directly to the Commander-in-Chief, Pacific, and over which General Abrams has only tenuous authority. Even within his own headquarters General Abrams has to deal with CORDS (Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support), the staff agency that supervises the American pacification effort. Many of the CORDS personnel are Foreign Service officers who are motivated by the career incentives of the Foreign Service rather than those

of the military. Military officers assigned to CORDS also have shown considerable independence from the regular military hierarchy in Vietnam. Despite the efforts of General Abrams to coordinate the pacification effort and the conventional military operations into his "one war" concept, CORDS as well as many of the component Army commands still have the habit of running their own wars. On the other hand, only by running its own war could an organization like CORDS break out of the institutional rigidity I have already described. The "one war" is very likely to be the *wrong* war.

It is not simply a matter of authority in implementing changes. Changes cannot be ordered. They must be understood and accepted, otherwise only the labels change but not the actual operations. There have already been numerous label changes and shuffles in Vietnam without changes of substance.

The belief that the changes proposed might not work; the conviction that our present strategy *is* working; the belief until recently that *more* was available and therefore change was not necessary; the belief that organizational changes are impossible in the midst of war; the view that the Vietnam war is an aberration and does not represent the future; the rejection of new doctrines as exotic and of marginal importance; the unaltered incentives to continue what we are doing now; the sense of institutional loyalty that rejects external pressure for change even when it coincides with private doubts; the twelve-month tour; and the lack of a single commander to impose his will on the system all have combined to keep things as they are.

Within the military institution, however, there is a growing feeling that something has gone wrong -- that although we have won the battles, we somehow have been deprived of our final victory. Self-criticism and resultant changes must take place now in an environment of increasingly hostile external criticism of the military. The military institution could react to this criticism in two ways: It could search for the flaws in its own doctrine that deluded it into thinking that it was going to win, or it could try to save face with "stab in the back" theories -- that it was put in an unwinnable situation, or that it was sold out even while it was winning.

There is the danger that, because of our institutional rigidity, we will fail in Vietnam. There is also the danger that a clear failure in Vietnam will be blamed on the civilians who imposed constraints, who usurped command responsibilities, and who failed to support the military institution when the war proved to be too costly. And there is the danger that as we "Vietnamize" the war, our institutional rigidity will cause us to impose our doctrine, our organization, and our technology on the Vietnamese armed forces to the point that they might be rendered incapable of successfully continuing the war after our withdrawal. We will have transferred to them our repertoire.